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ABSTRACT

Many people want a dictionary to give them information about acceptable and unacceptable word usage. The designations "correct" and "incorrect" are not adequate guides, for two reasons: what is acceptable usage does not remain the same from one generation to the next, and some uses that are not appropriate in formal English are appropriate in informal English. "The Dictionary of Idioms for the Deaf," designed to help deaf high school students understand and use idiomatic expressions, provides more usage labels and notes than do other dictionaries. This dictionary provides answers to the following kinds of questions about idiomatic expressions: Is the use of the idiom restricted to certain grammatical forms and constructions or to certain semantic contexts? Is it typically used by only one group in society or in only one kind of situation? Is it used chiefly in one part of the country? Is it considered slang, informal, literary, or formal? Is it in current use? Is it considered taboo or offensive? Is it avoided by careful writers? The dictionary does not give the authoritative "correct" or "incorrect" label that some people want; rather, it reports in what ways a word or phrase is typically used. Readers must use their own judgment about what is appropriate in their own circumstances. (GW)

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THE DICTIONARY AS A GUIDE TO WORD USAGE

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We look up a word in a dictionary most often to find out its meaning, pronunciation, or spelling. Many people also want to be able to look up a particular usage and be told whether it is correct or incorrect. But "correct" and "incorrect" are not adequate guides.

1. Why "Correct" and "Incorrect" Are Not Adequate Guides.

When Webster's Third New International Dictionary was published, there was a great outcry because it eliminated the label colloquial and did not label some words slang that many people felt should have been. One group of critics associated with the American Heritage Magazine even tried to buy control of the Merriam Company in order to suppress the Third Edition and issue a revised version. Failing in that, they produced their own dictionary, which reports to readers the opinions on correct usage of a panel of writers, educators, and other cultured people.

They soon found that what is "correct" or "incorrect" is not clear-cut. Sometimes about half the panel said that a usage was wrong, and half said it was all right. Critics of the American Heritage Dictionary have also pointed out that even when most of the panel frowned on certain locutions, the fact is that most cultured people today use them, at least in conversation. This points to two oversights in the traditional view of correct English. In the first place, what is acceptable usage does not remain the same from one generation to the next. Usage changes, slowly but surely, and the whole army of purists has not been able to hold it

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back. Anyone would appear ridiculous today who condemned "job" as a low word, as Dr. Johnson did in his 1755 dictionary; or who attacked the grammatical construction in a sentence like "A new school is being built," as Richard Grant White did half a century ago. (He insisted on using the older pattern, "A new school is building.")

In the second place, some usages that are not appropriate in formal English are quite appropriate in informal English. The story is told of a Chinese student who asked other students in the dormitory of an American college what he should say to the president's wife at a reception. On their advice, he greeted her with "Hiya, toots!" Laughably inappropriate! But it would have been just as inappropriate if he had greeted a girl with whom he had a blind date with "How do you do, Miss Jones." That would hardly start the evening off in a friendly tone. Foreign students often speak in very formal English, because that is the kind taught in the classroom, and it makes them seem unfriendly or even snobbish. Even native Americans sometimes use overformal English. One woman student always talked the kind of English her teachers had told her was correct. The other students did not like to have her join them, because when she started talking, everything froze up. Similarly, the story is told of a little boy who was an only child and had spent most of his time with his college-professor parents. He came in crying one day, and his mother asked, "What's the matter, John?" The boy answered, "The other children will not allow me to participate in their activities." His usage was very correct, but it was obviously not acceptable in the situation where he used it. To use bookish English in talking to other kids can have as unhappy consequences as using slang and colloquialisms in a class theme.

In the face of these complications, what can a dictionary say? Some dictionary editors claim that it is not feasible to give the detailed information about usage that a writer or speaker might want. They say that they don't have such information about all the words they enter, and to give it for some and not for others would be misleading. Besides, they say, to tell exactly when and where a word or sense is or is not used would add greatly to the cost of the dictionary, and people would not be willing to pay the extra price.

2. How One Dictionary Guided Word Usage: The Dictionary of Idioms for the Deaf.

I believe, however, that a dictionary can go farther than dictionaries usually do in telling how a word is typically used. I experimented in this direction several years ago when, in collaboration with Dr. Maxine Tull Boatner, I edited A Dictionary of Idioms for the Deaf, published by the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, Connecticut. This dictionary provides more usage labels and notes than other dictionaries.

2.1 Background Information on the Dictionary of Idioms for the Deaf.

2.1.1 Why More Labels?

Because the deaf students do not pick up English naturally in the home but learn it like a foreign language in the classroom, they need to be told not only what each idiom means, but also when and where it can and can not be used. The same information would be useful to foreign students learning English. And, from what I have seen as a college instructor in composition, some of our hearing, native American students, would also find such information useful.

In the rest of this paper, I will describe for you the kinds of usage information that we gave for words and senses in the Dictionary of Idioms

for the Deaf and point out other commonly used labels and notes that we had no occasion to use. Although the dictionary entries that I will use as examples are nearly all idiomatic expressions, the same kinds of labels and notes have been or could be applied to single words.

2.1.2 Sources of Labels.

Most of our labels were drawn from those used in other dictionaries. Some were those already familiar to many students in the Thorndike-Barnhart school dictionaries, which are widely used in schools for the deaf. We also used labels from Webster's Third New International Dictionary, which contains more help and more exact information on usage than it is given credit for. Beyond these, we used a few labels that, as far as I know, had not been used before, notably the label "formal".

2.1.3 Basis of Labeling

Usage information was given on a basis of tradition, intuition, and citation evidence.

The usage information was added to the entries by a special editor, Mrs. Peter Meltzer, a member of the etymological staff of the G.&C. Merriam Company. With each entry she was given a report on any restriction on usage found in the Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary, Webster's Third New International Dictionary, A Dictionary of American Slang by Wentworth and Flexner, and the Advanced Learner's Dictionary, which is an excellent British publication for foreigners learning English. In applying labels, however, she used her own intuition about actual usage, confirmed or corrected by quotations from books, magazines, and newspapers in our file or in the far more extensive file of the Merriam Company, which at that time contained about four and a half million citation slips. I served as review editor.

2.2 Kinds of Usage Information

Notes and labels describing conventions of usage are of various kinds.

2.2.1 Grammatical Constraints.

Some indicate constraints on the grammatical form or linguistic context of an expression. The note "Usually in past tense" is given for the idiom say a mouthful. The note "often used in the passive" accompanies the verb carry away. The expression beyond question is said to be "Used in the predicate." Some notes indicate words or constructions that must be used with the idiom. At the entry hot water is a note, "Often after in, into, out of." At horn in is the note "Often used with on." The idiom keep on is said to be "Used before a present participle," while about to is "Used with an infinitive."

Telling the student which idiomatic verb phrases take objects and which do not was a problem for us. Many dictionaries use the grammatical labels v.i. and v.t. for intransitive and transitive verbs. However, few students in schools for the deaf have been introduced to these terms. Moreover, the Thorndike-Barnhart dictionaries, which our dictionary was to supplement, do not use them. We could have said after each verb sense, "Used with an object" or "Used without an object", but that would have taken too much space. We settled for indicating transitive or intransitive use only by the wording of the definition and of the illustrative sentence. If a verb could be used both ways, we gave two sets of definitions and illustrative sentences--a practice that proved confusing even to some people working on the dictionary.

2.2.2 Semantic Constraints.

Some idioms needed notes about their semantic context. One class of expressions in English occur only in negative, interrogative, or conditional

sentences, or with limiting adverbs like hardly, scarcely, and barely. After writing the first note using those technical terms, however, we pictured to ourselves the poor student coming up against it and being stricken with paralysis. We settled for a simplified note: "Usually used with a negative", which we used at such entries as see hide nor hair of, dry behind the ears, and lift a finger. Another class of expressions required the note "Used with a possessive," e.g. blood runs cold. Illustrative sentences clarify the notes.

The only permitted subject of the verb phrase kick over is shown by a usage guide phrase, "Of an engine or motor." The only object of a verb is indicated within the definition. Thus the verb while away is defined, 'to spend (time) idly.'

2.2.3 Use Chiefly in One Variety of English.

Some labels indicate that a usage belongs to a particular variety of English or a specialized vocabulary. Dialect labels show that a word is used chiefly in one part of the country. Many dialectologists divide the United States into three major dialect areas: Northern, Midland, and Southern, and in clearcut cases these terms are used as labels in Webster's Third. Our dictionary entered very few dialect idioms, but the expression "get your ducks in a row," a favorite expression of the superintendent of the American School for the Deaf, was entered and labeled Southern. When we lacked information to pin down the area where an expression was used, we followed the practice of Webster's Third and applied the generalized label dialect, for example to the idioms as how, aside of, and as lief.

The way dictionaries label words and phrases used chiefly by groups with little social prestige reflects popular attitudes toward language,

attitudes that merit the attention of civil rights activists. Expressions used chiefly by high-prestige groups--such as jet setters and other "beautiful people" --go unlabeled; while those used chiefly by low-prestige groups such as Appalachian mountaineers or ghetto blacks are labeled substandard or the like in dictionaries. It is, however, a social fact of life that some varieties of English are not considered acceptable for classroom and business use, and the writer or speaker wants the dictionary to tell him when words and idioms are frowned on for this reason. Webster's Third applies the label substandard to such forms as drownded, hisself, and all to once. In looking over the expressions which we labeled substandard in the Dictionary of Idioms, I now think they should have been labeled dialect (e.g. let's don't) or slang (e.g. in bad).

Use chiefly by children is indicated in our dictionary at the entry yum-yum, and all better is said to be "Used to or by children." Some words or expressions are used typically by men or typically by women, but we do not indicate this in the Dictionary of Idioms. The fact is indirectly suggested at the entry dear me, where the illustrative sentence "Dear me! My purse is lost!" is paraphrased "The lady is unhappy over the loss of her purse."

Sports, professions, trades, and other special activities often have special vocabularies. Such special use of a word can usually be made clear in the definition, but sometimes a usage label, guide phrase, or note prevents ambiguity or orients the dictionary user. In the Dictionary of Idioms, the original definition of "sacrifice fly" began with a guide phrase: "In baseball: A ball hit high in the air..." The phrase John Doe is explained with a usage note rather than a definition as "A name used for an unknown person by the police and in law courts."

2.2.4 Use Chiefly in One Kind of Situation.

There are restrictions on the social situation in which some words and phrases may be used. Dictionaries show this by "style labels." The Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary uses the style labels slang, informal, and poetic. For the Dictionary of Idioms we adopted the Thorndike labels slang and informal, but in place of poetic we substituted a broader label literary, and we added a new label, formal.

We applied the label slang to idioms typically used in social situations of great informality, particularly in familiar conversation. When an expression was a candidate for the label slang, we examined the contexts in which it was found for other marks of great informality, such as incomplete sentences, neologisms, faddish language, and familiar tone. Idioms labeled slang include Bronx cheer, get wise, and louse up.

We applied the style label informal to idioms that signalled less informality than those labeled slang but that were still not acceptable in an English composition. Idioms labeled informal include for crying out loud, horse sense, and hot and heavy. At the entry same here, an additional note says "Used only in speech."

Often it was difficult to decide between informal and slang usage on one hand and between informal and standard usage on the other, and there were differences of opinion. The expression get ahead (meaning 'to succeed') was labeled US Informal in Thorndike, but our usage editor felt, and I agreed, that the expression had become standard.

It is interesting to note that variant wordings and different senses of the same idiom may have different usage status. The form all along is standard, but right along is informal. The first sense of "kick off"

('begin play in a football game') is standard; the second sense ('begin, launch') is informal, and the third ('die') is slang.

Instead of the style label poetic used by Thorndike, for which we had almost no need, we used literary, applied to expressions that students might find in literature but should not ordinarily use in speaking or even in expository writing. At the entry "come to pass," which a definer had tentatively labeled formal, the usage editor commented: "I think literary the more precise label for this. It's not a locution we are apt to use even in the most formal document. Slightly archaic, vaguely dramatic--ideal for certain kinds of literature, but not for normal use." Other idioms labeled literary include lay waste, in the lap of the gods, and law unto oneself.

A style label which I believe to be an innovation in our dictionary is formal. We applied this to expressions appropriate in a formal speech or a formal piece of writing, but not in an ordinary conversation or a friendly letter. We felt that this restriction was just as important for the deaf student to know as the restrictions of informality. Expressions labeled formal include of late, lay to rest, and on behalf of.

Some words and phrases are unacceptable to people for vague or mixed reasons. They are not dialect, because they are used all over the country. The are not substandard, because they are used by educated people. And they do not have the tone of slang; indeed, some seem to be used for formal effect, like irregardless. In many cases they seem to be either innovations not yet fully accepted or colloquial expressions passing out of use. Webster's Third applied the label nonstandard to such expressions. We adopted that for the Dictionary of Idioms and applied it to such entries

as have oneself (as in "He had himself a ball") do out of, and put one in mind of. Similar in effect to the label nonstandard is a note at high-class -- "Avoided by careful speakers;" and one at do tell -- "An inelegant expression."

2.2.5

In the Dictionary of Idioms, we did not need the temporal label obsolete, used in Webster's Third with words not found standard use since 1755. We had little occasion to use the temporal label archaic, with which Webster's Third marks words like methinks that were in common use in former times but today are used rarely or only in special contexts, such as historical fiction. In the Dictionary of Idioms, we used the label archaic only at cast up in the sense 'reckon, calculate;" and at put away in the sense 'divorce.' Since archaic suggests antique literary use, it might have been useful to have a label like passe or old-fashioned for colloquial expressions passing out of use and found today chiefly in the speech of older people. Such a label might have been used for the idiom put one in mind of mentioned above, which appears to have been in general colloquial use formerly but which now strikes many people as quaint or awkward.

It is interesting to note that standard words that pass out of general use tend to be preserved in written, especially literary, use; while colloquial words come to be limited to the usage of a geographical or social dialect or are felt to be somehow nonstandard.

2.2.6 Social Taboo.

Some words and phrases are socially taboo. We collected a few taboo phrases for the Dictionary of Idioms, but the committee supervising the project felt it unwise to enter these in a school dictionary. My point of

view was that it would be less embarrassing for a student to look them up in the dictionary than to ask someone about them. Other dictionaries have used such notes as "a taboo term" and "Often considered vulgar" at entries for four-letter words.

Some expressions are considered insulting or impolite. Webster's Third used the note "Usually used disparagingly" at the entries for wop and hunky and the note "Usually taken to be offensive" at chink and greaser. In the Dictionary of Idioms the expression cheap skate is noted as "An insulting term." At keep one's mouth shut, the reader is warned "A rude expression when used as a command." At the entry put up or shut up is the note "Often considered rude."

2.2.7 Esthetic Constraints.

A number of expressions, chiefly figurative in origin, are often frowned on for esthetic reasons. When they were first used, they lent a flavor of vigor or wit; used again and again, they lost their force, and they affect many careful writers and speakers the way last year's fashions affect the style-conscious. We decided that it would be useful to caution the deaf student about these, since most English teachers try to teach students to avoid them in careful writing. However, people disagree as to which commonly used fixed expressions are cliches, and which are acceptable idioms. The reason for the difference seems to be that as long as a person retains some sense of the original meaning of a stereotyped figurative expression, he feels it to be a cliche. We might say that a cliche is just a figure of speech that has died but hasn't yet dried up into an ordinary idiom; it still smells a little.

The usage editor thought that she could identify overused expressions objectively, and with some misgivings I let her apply cautionary labels

to a large number of entries. The entries beggars can't be choosers and in the arms of Morpheus are labeled cliche. The note "A hackneyed phrase" is applied to blue in the face and hot and bothered and the note "a trite expression" to boardinghouse reach and a lick and a promise. At the idioms get away with murder and cream of the crop, we used the note "An overworked phrase." This or "Avoided in careful usage" might well have replaced the others as a uniform note and one more readily understood by deaf students.

I still have misgivings about trying to label overused expressions. These labels raised eyebrows among my linguistic colleagues and even aroused protest from one of the teachers of the deaf, who wrote me as follows: "An expression may be a cliche to one, but to growing-ups, the whole world is new. Do we deprive our students of appropriate expressions because we're blase? Down with anti-cliches."

Perhaps a lexicographer could classify items as "cliche" more objectively if he used tests like those for slang: he could examine the contexts in which they are found to see whether they typically occur with such other marks of careless style as barbarisms, tautologisms, faddish language, vague and very general terms, loose usage, and mixed metaphors.

3. Conclusion

This paper began by noting that people want a dictionary to give them information about acceptable usage; and by asking what kinds of information about usage it is feasible and useful for a dictionary to give. I have shown how a dictionary designed to help deaf high school students understand and use idiomatic expressions found it feasible to answer the following questions. Is the use of the idiom restricted to certain

grammatical forms and constructions or to certain semantic contexts? Is it used typically by only one group in society or in only one kind of situation? It is in current use? Is it considered taboo or offensive? Is it avoided by careful writers? This information is not the authoritative "Correct" or "Incorrect" that some people want; rather it reports in what ways a word or phrase is typically used. The dictionary user is still obliged to exercise his own judgment as to what is appropriate in his own circumstances.

Have such notes and labels been found helpful? I do not know. On this, as in all areas of dictionary use, research needs to be done. I would be glad to have teachers and students -- or anyone -- report to me what happened when they went to a dictionary with questions about usage. That will help us make dictionaries that are better guides to word usage.